



U.S. Department of Justice

Immigration and Naturalization Service

OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE APPEALS  
425 Eye Street N.W.  
ULLB, 3rd Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20536

C1

NOV 29 2000

File: EAC-98-096-50528 Office: Vermont Service Center Date:

IN RE: Petitioner:  
Beneficiary:

Petition: Petition for Special Immigrant Religious Worker Pursuant to Section 203(b)(4) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 U.S.C. 1153(b)(4)

IN BEHALF OF PETITIONER:



Public Copy

Identifying data retained to  
prevent clearly unwarranted  
invasion of personal privacy

INSTRUCTIONS:

This is the decision in your case. All documents have been returned to the office which originally decided your case. Any further inquiry must be made to that office.

If you believe the law was inappropriately applied or the analysis used in reaching the decision was inconsistent with the information provided or with precedent decisions, you may file a motion to reconsider. Such a motion must state the reasons for reconsideration and be supported by any pertinent precedent decisions. Any motion to reconsider must be filed within 30 days of the decision that the motion seeks to reconsider, as required under 8 C.F.R. 103.5(a)(1)(i).

If you have new or additional information which you wish to have considered, you may file a motion to reopen. Such a motion must state the new facts to be proved at the reopened proceeding and be supported by affidavits or other documentary evidence. Any motion to reopen must be filed within 30 days of the decision that the motion seeks to reopen, except that failure to file before this period expires may be excused in the discretion of the Service where it is demonstrated that the delay was reasonable and beyond the control of the applicant or petitioner. Id.

Any motion must be filed with the office which originally decided your case along with a fee of \$110 as required under 8 C.F.R. 103.7.

FOR THE ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER,  
EXAMINATIONS

Mary C. Mulrean, Acting Director  
Administrative Appeals Office

**DISCUSSION:** The immigrant visa petition was denied by the Director, Vermont Service Center. The matter is now before the Associate Commissioner for Examinations on appeal. The appeal will be dismissed.

The petitioner is a church. It seeks classification of the beneficiary as a special immigrant religious worker pursuant to section 203(b)(4) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (the Act), 8 U.S.C. 1153(b)(4), to serve as a reader. The director denied the petition determining that the petitioner had failed to establish the beneficiary's two years of continuous religious work experience. The director also found that the petitioner had failed to establish that the prospective occupation is a religious occupation.

On appeal, counsel argues that the beneficiary is eligible for the benefit sought.

Section 203(b)(4) of the Act provides classification to qualified special immigrant religious workers as described in section 101(a)(27)(C) of the Act, 8 U.S.C. 1101(a)(27)(C), which pertains to an immigrant who:

- (i) for at least 2 years immediately preceding the time of application for admission, has been a member of a religious denomination having a bona fide nonprofit, religious organization in the United States;

- (ii) seeks to enter the United States--

- (I) solely for the purpose of carrying on the vocation of a minister of that religious denomination,

- (II) before October 1, 2003, in order to work for the organization at the request of the organization in a professional capacity in a religious vocation or occupation, or

- (III) before October 1, 2003, in order to work for the organization (or for a bona fide organization which is affiliated with the religious denomination and is exempt from taxation as an organization described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Code of 1986) at the request of the organization in a religious vocation or occupation; and

- (iii) has been carrying on such vocation, professional work, or other work continuously for at least the 2-year period described in clause (i).

The beneficiary is a thirty-three-year-old married male native and citizen of Russia. The petitioner indicated that, on August 16, 1992, the beneficiary entered the United States as a student for duration of status. The petitioner further indicated that the beneficiary had never worked in the United States without permission.

The first issue to be examined is whether the petitioner has established that the beneficiary had two years of continuous work experience in the proffered position.

8 C.F.R. 204.5(m) (1) states, in pertinent part, that:

All three types of religious workers must have been performing the vocation, professional work, or other work continuously (either abroad or in the United States) for at least the two year period immediately preceding the filing of the petition.

The petition was filed on February 10, 1998. Therefore, the petitioner must establish that the beneficiary had been continuously working in the prospective occupation for at least the two years from February 10, 1996 to February 10, 1998.

The petitioner submitted a photocopy of a "service award" given to the beneficiary on December 4, 1997 in recognition of his "five years of dedicated service as a reader and cantor." The petitioner also submitted a letter from Bishop Gabriel who indicated that the beneficiary was ordained to the order of reader on October 1, 1997.

On May 5, 1998, the director requested that the petitioner submit evidence of the beneficiary's work experience during the two-year period prior to filing. In response, the petitioner stated that the beneficiary "became a Reader (Cantor) of our Church in October of 1993." In a separate letter, the petitioner stated that the beneficiary "has been volunteering his time as our Church Reader since our Reader retired in 1993." The petitioner submitted a letter from the beneficiary's father who indicated that he has "been supporting my son in the United States since 1993." The petitioner also submitted a letter and photocopied checks from [REDACTED] indicated that he has been "helping" the beneficiary.

On appeal, counsel argues that the evidence submitted in support of the petition indicates that the beneficiary has two years of continuous religious work experience. Neither the statute nor the regulations stipulate an explicit requirement that the work experience must have been full-time paid employment in order to be considered qualifying. This is in recognition of the special circumstances of some religious workers, specifically those engaged

in a religious vocation, in that they may not be salaried in the conventional sense and may not follow a conventional work schedule. 8 C.F.R. 204.5(m)(2) defines a religious vocation, in part, as a calling to religious life evidenced by the taking of vows. The regulations therefore recognize a distinction between someone practicing a life-long religious calling and a lay employee. The regulation defines religious occupations, in contrast, in general terms as an activity related to a traditional religious function. *Id.* In order to qualify for special immigrant classification in a religious occupation, the job offer for a lay employee of a religious organization must show that he or she will be employed in the conventional sense of full-time salaried employment. See 8 C.F.R. 204.5(m)(4). Therefore, the prior work experience must have been full-time salaried employment in order to qualify as well. The absence of specific statutory language requiring that the two years of work experience be conventional full-time paid employment does not imply, in the case of religious occupations, that any form of intermittent, part-time, or volunteer activity constitutes continuous work experience in such an occupation. In this case, the beneficiary has clearly been a volunteer at the petitioner's church. Any monetary assistance the beneficiary may have received from a congregant cannot be considered evidence of full-time salaried employment of the beneficiary by the petitioner.

The petitioner has not established that the beneficiary was continuously engaged in a religious occupation from February 10, 1996 to February 10, 1998. The objection of the director has not been overcome on appeal. Accordingly, the petition may not be approved.

The next issue to be examined is whether the prospective occupation is a religious occupation.

8 C.F.R. 204.5(m)(2) states, in pertinent part, that:

*Religious occupation* means an activity which relates to a traditional religious function. Examples of individuals in religious occupations include, but are not limited to, liturgical workers, religious instructors, religious counselors, cantors, catechists, workers in religious hospitals or religious health care facilities, missionaries, religious translators, or religious broadcasters. This group does not include janitors, maintenance workers, clerks, fund raisers, or persons solely involved in the solicitation of donations.

The regulation does not define the term "traditional religious function" and instead provides only a brief list of examples. The examples listed reflect that not all employees of a religious organization are considered to be engaged in a religious

occupation. The regulation states that positions such as cantor, missionary, or religious instructor are examples of qualifying religious occupations. Persons in such positions must complete prescribed courses of training established by the governing body of the denomination and their services are directly related to the creed of the denomination. The regulation reflects that nonqualifying positions are those whose duties are primarily administrative, humanitarian, or secular. Persons in such positions must be qualified in their occupation, but they require no specific religious training or theological education.

The Service therefore interprets the term "traditional religious function" to require a demonstration that the duties of the position are directly related to the religious creed of the denomination, that specific prescribed religious training or theological education is required, that the position is defined and recognized by the governing body of the denomination, and that the position is traditionally a permanent, full-time, salaried occupation within the denomination.

The petitioner submitted photocopies of several certificates of appreciation and achievement awarded by it to the beneficiary. On May 5, 1998, the director requested that the petitioner submit additional information. In response, the petitioner stated that the beneficiary's "responsibilities include assisting the Priest in reading the church services and Holy Scripture . . . . He has a strong faith in God and a deep commitment to serving God as an Orthodox Christian." The rector of Saint Mary's Russian Orthodox Church stated that a reader "must be familiar with Old Slavonic, Orthodox prayers, the correct book to refer to, have music ability and be able to raise his voice at the appropriate time because the service is conducted in various tones."

On appeal, counsel argues that the prospective occupation is a religious occupation and that the petitioner has submitted sufficient documentation to support this. Counsel's argument is unpersuasive. The petitioner has not submitted any evidence that the beneficiary completed a formal theological education or specific religious training prior to qualifying for the position of reader. The various certificates awarded to the beneficiary do not provide any description of what was required of the beneficiary prior to his receipt of them. Further, based on statements made by the petitioner, it appears that a devotion to, and familiarity with, the church are the main qualifications required of a reader. Moreover, as the beneficiary has been performing these duties on a voluntary basis in the past, it is clear that the position is not traditionally a full-time, salaried position at the church. Accordingly, the petitioner has failed to establish that the prospective occupation is a religious occupation.

Beyond the decision of the director, the petitioner has failed to establish that the beneficiary is qualified to work in a religious occupation as required at 8 C.F.R. 204.5(m)(3). Also, the petitioner has failed to establish that it made a valid job offer to the beneficiary as required at 8 C.F.R. 204.5(m)(4) or that it has the ability to pay the proffered wage as required at 8 C.F.R. 204.5(g)(2). As the appeal will be dismissed on the grounds discussed, these issues need not be examined further.

The burden of proof in these proceedings rests solely with the petitioner. Section 291 of the Act, 8 U.S.C. 1361. The petitioner has not sustained that burden.

**ORDER:** The appeal is dismissed.